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ABSTRACT

Different theorists have suggested that an individual's view of God may be related to one's view of one's father, one's mother, or one's self. A study was conducted to examine the relationship of college students' conceptions of the wrathfulness-kindliness of God to their conceptions of their father's and mother's permissiveness, authoritarianism, and authoritativeness, and to their own self-esteem. Catholic college students (N=83) who considered God to be important in their lives, responded to the Tennessee Self-Concept Scale, a father's Parental Authority Questionnaire, a mother's Parental Authority Questionnaire, and a conception of God questionnaire. The results revealed that respondents' conception of self was more strongly related to their conceptions of God than were any of the conception of parental authority variables; self-esteem accounted for 24% of the variance in respondents' conceptions of the wrathfulness-kindliness of God. Respondents who felt themselves valuable, capable, and worthy were more easily able to conceptualize God as a loving, patient, and forgiving authority figure than were those who viewed themselves with greater degrees of self-dissatisfaction and self-rejection. (NB)

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Conceptions of Parents, Conceptions of Self, and Conceptions of God

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ABSTRACT: *This study investigated the relationship of college students' conceptions of the wrathfulness-kindliness of God to: a) their conceptions of their father's and mother's permissiveness, authoritarianism, and authoritativeness and b) their own self-esteem. The participants' conception of self (i.e., their self-esteem) was more strongly related to their conceptions of God than were any of the conception of parental authority variables; self-esteem accounted for 24% of the variance in participants' conceptions of the wrathfulness-kindliness of God.*

Freud (1928, 1946) suggested that in response to the powerlessness and ethical indifference of the human condition, primitive people conceptualized an all-powerful God figure. Through this omnipotent God, one could regress to the time of childhood when a strong and powerful father was a source of reassurance and protection. These conjectures (which have strongly flavored psychoanalytic work on the subject) have led to the suggestion that an individual's subjective conception of God is largely a projection of one's attitudes, feelings, and opinions toward his/her earthly father. Some studies have re-

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ported findings supporting this hypothesis (e.g., Siegman, 1961), others have suggested that personal conceptions of God are more closely related to one's mother concept than to one's father concept (e.g., Nelson & Jones, 1957), others have reported a direct relationship between the God concept and the conception of the more esteemed parent (see Nicholson & Edwards, 1979), and still others have failed to find support for this Freudian conjecture (e.g., Vergote & Tamayo, 1980).

Benson and Spilka (1973) have suggested an alternative to parent concepts as the source of personal conceptions of God. Employing a cognitive consistency rationale, these investigators suggested that one's view of God may be adjusted in such a way as to establish consonance with one's view of self. Consistent with their hypotheses, self-esteem was found to positively correlate with loving God-images. Similar findings have since been reported by Flakoll (1974).

In the present study, the relationships of the God-concept to both the father/mother concepts and the self-concept (i.e., self-esteem) were investigated. College students' conceptions of the wrathfulness-kindliness of God were correlated with a) permissive, authoritarian, and authoritative parenting by the father and the mother and b) the students' self-esteem. Given the highly sporadic nature of the research support for a projection theory of one's conception of God, it is hypothesized that an individual's conception of self is more strongly related to his/her God-concept than is that individual's conception of either his/her father or mother.

Method

Subjects

The participants were 127 Catholic college students who agreed to participate in the study as part of an introductory psychology course requirement. These 127 students were asked to respond to the following two items on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5): "God is very important in my life", and "My relationship with God gives my life a certain purpose that it would not otherwise have." Only those students who strongly agreed (5) or agreed (4) with both of these statements were included in the present analyses. This control was exercised for two reasons: a) to eliminate potential "religious disparagers" from the analyses, and b) to increase the likelihood that participants included in the analyses had actually formulated a conception of God (i.e., the more important something is to a person, then the more apt he/she is to give thought to that thing). The remaining 83 participants completed several questionnaires.

Materials and Procedure

Each participant completed four questionnaires: a) the Tennessee Self-Concept Scale (Fitts, 1965), b) a father's Parental Authority Questionnaire, c) a mother's Parental Authority Questionnaire, and d) a conception of God questionnaire.

Parental authority. The exercise of permissive, authoritarian, and authoritative parental practices was measured by means of the Parental Authority Questionnaire (PAQ). Concepts and items for the PAQ were derived from Baumrind's (1971) parental authority prototypes. Initially 48 questionnaire items were constructed based upon the descriptions of permissive, authoritarian, and

authoritative parenting proposed by Baumrind. These 48 items were presented to 21 professionals (11 females, 10 males) working in the fields of psychology, education, sociology, and social work. Each of these professionals was also given verbatim descriptions of each of these parental prototypes (Baumrind, 1971, pp. 22-23), and was asked to judge each item as indicative of permissive parenting, authoritarian parenting, or authoritative parenting. Each professional was further instructed not to categorize a particular item if he/she judged that it failed to clearly delineate one of these three styles of parental authority. If greater than 95% of the judges agreed that an item unequivocally represented one of the three parental prototypes, then it was included in a final pool of items. The criterion for inclusion in this final pool was met by 36 of the 48 questionnaire items. From this pool of 36 items, 10 permissive, 10 authoritarian, and 10 authoritative were retained for the final PAQ.

Each of the 30 items in the PAQ is stated from the point of view of an individual appraising the authority exercised by his/her parents. Rather than relying upon either a) parents' reports of the parental prototype they employed or b) observations of parental authority exercised with their children, we chose to rely upon the children's perceptions of their parents' authority. Consistent with a symbolic interactionist perspective, the actual parental behavior to which an individual has been exposed will effect that individual to the extent and in the way that he/she perceives that behavior. Therefore we chose to determine parental authority by means of phenomenological appraisals by each participant.

Responses to each of the 30 PAQ items were made on a 5-point Likert scale

ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5). Each participant completed two forms of the PAQ, one to evaluate the parenting provided by his/her father and one to evaluate the parenting of his/her mother. Examples of items from the permissive scale are: "My father/mother has always felt that what children need is to be free to make up their own minds and to do what they want to do, even if this does not agree with what their parents might want"; and "As I was growing up my father/mother allowed me to decide most things for myself without a lot of direction from him/her." Examples of items from the authoritarian scale are: "As I was growing up my father/mother did not allow me to question any decision that he/she had made"; and "My father/mother has always felt that more force should be used by parents in order to get their children to behave the way they are supposed to." Examples from the authoritative scale are: "My father/mother has always encouraged verbal give-and-take whenever I have felt that family rules and restrictions were unreasonable"; and "My father/mother had clear standards of behavior for the children in our home as I was growing up, but he/she was willing to adjust those standards to the needs of each of the individual children in the family."

Test-retest studies of the PAQ based upon the responses of 61 college students over a two-week interval yielded the following reliabilities: $r = .77$ for father's permissiveness, $r = .85$ for father's authoritarianism, $r = .92$ for father's authoritativeness, $r = .81$ for mother's permissiveness, $r = .86$ for mother's authoritarianism, and $r = .78$ for mother's authoritativeness. Responses of 185 college students to the PAQ yielded the following Cronbach (1951) coefficient alpha values: .74 for father's permissiveness, .87 for father's authoritarianism, .85 for father's authoritativeness, .75 for mother's permis-

siveness, .85 for mother's authoritarianism, and .82 for mother's authoritativeness. These reliability and coefficient alpha values are highly respectable given the fact that there are only 10 items per scale.

Conception of God. Bipolar adjectives deriving from Gorsuch's (1968) "wrathfulness" and "kindliness" factors in ratings of God were used to construct an Osgood Semantic Differential Scale. Eight bipolar adjective pairs comprised this scale: "avenging-comforting", "stern-gracious", "cruel-kind", "punishing-forgiving", "critical-merciful", "tough-gentle", "wrathful-patient", and "condemning-loving". The higher the score on this scale, the more loving is one's view of God's authority.

Results and Conclusions

Correlations between the participants' conception of God and the other seven variables are presented in Table 1. The only variable to correlate significantly with participants' conception of God was self-esteem: $r = .449$ ($p <$

Table 1

Correlations Between Conceptions of God and: a) Conceptions of Father's and Mother's Authority and b) Conceptions of Self

	Permissive father	Authoritarian father	Authoritative father	Permissive mother	Authoritarian mother	Authoritative mother	Self-esteem
Conception of God	-.099	-.094	+.056	-.088	-.103	+.153	+.449***

***$p < .00005$

.00005). Regression analyses further confirmed these initial observations: self-esteem was associated with 24% of the variance in the conception of God scores, and the addition of the other variables to the regression equation failed to augment this R^2 value.

Contrary to Freud's conjectures, the permissiveness/authoritarianism/authoritativeness of neither the father nor the mother was related to the participants' conception of God. Far outweighing the influence of these parental variables was a conception of self --- self-esteem. Clearly, those individuals who felt that they were valuable, capable, and worthy were more easily able to conceptualize God as an authority figure who is loving, patient, and forgiving than were those who viewed themselves with greater degrees of self-dissatisfaction and self-rejection.

Flakoll (1974) reported a similar relationship between loving God images and high self-esteem among junior high school students, and he further reported fewer neurotic behavior patterns among those students who held loving God images than among those who viewed God as more punishing and distant. In discussing his findings, Flakoll suggested that one's level of self-esteem as well as the incidence of maladjustment may be the result of one's personal view of God along the wrathfulness-kindliness continuum. It is our view, however, that given the fact that the onset of the development of self-esteem appears to be fairly early and that one's level of self-esteem seems to be stable over various age ranges (Blyth & Traeger, 1983; Dusek & Flaherty, 1981; Knox, 1977; Savin-Williams, 1983; Wylie, 1979 --- in fact, Wylie stated that there is no "age difference in overall self-regard between ages six and 50", p. 33), it is doubtful that loving God images are causing higher levels of self-esteem.

Furthermore, given the fact that low levels of self-esteem are associated with various signs of maladjustment (e.g., Bachman, 1982; Coopersmith, 1967; Fitts, 1972; Rosenberg, 1965; Wylie, 1961), it seems likely that self-esteem is the antecedent factor in Flakoll's (1974) reported relationships among perceptions of God, maladjustment, and self-esteem. In fact, Benson and Spilka (1973) have reported data in support of this conclusion.

If a person's level of self-esteem strongly influences his/her view of God (as the data of the present study suggest), then it should not be surprising to find that when those working in religious contexts attempt to present a balanced view of God as both forgiving and punishing, as both gentle and tough, as both loving and condemning, etc., some people (those with high self-esteem) walk away more convinced of God's kindly nature, while others (those with low self-esteem) depart ever more convinced of God's wrath. To the extent that such speculations actually occur (more research is necessary to further confirm them), it is unfortunate. We are well aware of the strong relationship between parental nurturance, love, and acceptance and one's level of self-esteem (Bachman, 1970; Buri, Kirchner, & Walsh, in press; Coopersmith, 1967; Gecas, 1971; Sears, 1970). Since God is typically viewed as a parental figure, it would seem that the self-esteem of a committed believer could be enhanced through a realization of God's love for him/her. However, it appears to be the case that those individuals who are likely in the greatest need of a God image that is gentle, patient, and loving (i.e., those who suffer from low self-esteem) are more apt to view God as stern, critical, and condemning.

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